

Seattle University, Room KC 517

Seattle Planning Commissioner: Jerry Finrow

Facilitator: Jim Metz, DPD

Note Taker: Katie Sheehy, DPD

Attendees:

- Planning Commissioner
  - Representative of the City Neighborhood Council and Phinney Ridge Community Council
  - Capitol Hill Housing Improvement Partnership (CHHIP)
  - Jackson Place – Multifamily neighborhood resident
  - Ballard – Multifamily neighborhood resident
  - Southeast Seattle – Multifamily neighborhood resident
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**1. “What is the nature of new development in/near your neighborhood? Are a variety of housing types being built or are they all similar?”**

The Goodwill site will include more than 200 units with retail and other surplus land that will be converted to condos, lots of activity will take place in the north Rainier Valley over the next five years.

Capitol Hill has been built up for a long time with the highest density in the region. Single family houses are being demolished for 5 to 7 story structures. Seattle University and Seattle Central Community College are also constructing new buildings. Most of what is being built is not of the best quality and seems to lack amenities and services. I want Seattle to be a city, but there has not been a balance or tradeoff with increased density that also involves increased police, parks, services, and transportation.

We have seen some of those amenities in Ballard with the new library that was recently completed and the new park.

Capitol Hill’s library was recently renovated, but it isn’t open as much now. The need for services is increasing but it’s not being met, especially relative to the mix of incomes.

There has been dramatic new growth in my neighborhood. It’s typically new condos that dramatically change the character of the street. One building started was under construction, then burned down and is going back up again. The new buildings decrease the amount of light that gets to the street. Phinney is relatively narrow so the extra story of height makes a big difference compared to what traditionally has been built in L-3 zones. When the day comes that the next blocks will be redeveloped too, it will become a canyon. The loss of sky views is just as significant as loss of light. It’s similar to the loss of small homes in favor of mega homes. House remodels seem to be on steroids. Also, older homes are being torn down...these are the interesting homes that are all of a sudden gone, like the Twin Tepees. New townhomes replace older duplexes, which are not as affordable for people to live in.

There is significant development pressure. Everything is lower than 65' in LDT and people are just starting to realize how much money they can make by building more.

In Eastlake, lots of new development comes from houses that are being converted. Seattle doesn't have very good sun access formulas within the Code. In areas where it could be possible to control bulk and height so that more light gets to the street, it isn't happening. Eastlake does have a lot of development pressures.

In Licton Springs it is mostly single family homes without as much development pressure. (Jokingly in response to Al Korpela) They do like to cut down trees though.

Phinney is a long and linear neighborhood that is a few minutes to Ballard and has Greenwood just to the north, which provides the formation for a stage of drastic change. At one point 1200 housing units were being proposed. A lot of units along one of the few east-west arterials raises a big question, which is how to handle it? Do we need more bus pull-out lanes? Mixed transit?

There is a real possibility to create smaller units.

## **2. "Are the zones that we have the right ones or are there too many?"**

While we have these zones, we don't have good urban design. We need better maps that make better sense of the city. We need to think about how zoning could be better designed or applied so that places make better sense.

The problem isn't that we have too many zones. Our zones don't make sense and acknowledge the existing conditions, topography, and surrounding community. There is nothing in our culture that drives really good buildings in our neighborhoods. Maybe part of the problem is the zoning.

Do we need more sophisticated planning tools and zoning?

We need more subtle zoning that is adaptable to specific lots.

We are doing a heck of a lot better than those white boxes on stilts from the 70's. I think design review helps improve the quality of design.

Everything is reflective of the architectural trends of the time.

The same things are built all around the country if not the globe. When developers use the lowest quality materials, they last for a while but not a long time. People do not construct buildings to last for as long anymore.

A lot of multifamily buildings have been shrouded while leaks are being fixed.

They've looked at the materials and do not use it [dryvit] as much anymore.

It is not that there are too many zones, or that they are too complicated...the solution might be beyond zoning because it has to do more with style and design of the buildings.

It's a hard thing to write into the rules because someone can always figure out how to work around them.

Architects always say that if it were just left up to them, they could create better buildings.

But design is always subjective and people have different opinions about what works in a neighborhood.

Variety and a mix of styles and scales appeals to most people

Some developers just build the same thing over and over without regard to the specific site location or neighborhood.

It's always going to be hard to legislate style; land is always claimed for the public domain. I don't know that limiting the size of a building is the right way to improve its design.

Various neighborhoods do have design guidelines that seem to help.

Hopefully we are creating something humane in terms of housing. If people are given enough space to do things like garden, zoning can become part of making better neighborhoods.

Seattle has made a lot of progress relative to the problems and issues that we faced 20-30 years ago.

What is the history of multifamily zoning? Why do we have so many zones anyway?

### **3. "What about new development is contributing positively to neighborhoods and what is not?"**

P-patches contribute positively. [general agreement]

Ballard is doing pretty well with the increase in housing. There are industrial areas around Ballard, and the area has smaller blocks than much of the rest of the city. It was historically a working class town with a high percentage of the population having lived in Europe before. I'm pleased with the new library and park...transportation is okay...there is a good amount of open space in the area, particularly with the water nearby. Affordability continues to be a concern though.

The City's tree protection program is good...so is the preservation process in general, which helps protect historic properties.

We are seeing some arterials being repaved. Street design has improved somewhat, particularly with regard to the number of curb cuts that are ADA accessible. Improvements to signals and landscape can really improve the character of an area. Some of the uses in new mixed-use buildings can help a neighborhood but it isn't necessarily better than what was there before. A new mixed use building recently replaced a well-like restaurant in my neighborhood. We gained 32 housing units, a bakery and two spaces that are still vacant. The building also significantly decrease the amount of light that reaches the street because it is so tall. Design Review really has to be pushed to the limits to see anything positive accomplished. In the end, compromise is okay. I would rather have the old restaurant, but the new building is okay...it might be okay. Small but active businesses really make a positive difference.

Things are changing so quickly in my neighborhood because a lot of land was vacant. The Goodwill site is being redeveloped and there might be a new Target moving in. Hundreds of housing units are supposed to go on the site too. There used to be a lot of crime, so just about any change is positive. The new development increases foot traffic. With new influences replacing the vacant lots, we see a lot less litter. Inappropriate activities are also being squeezed out.

Some cities actually prohibit one-story buildings in downtown to encourage higher density development.

I live in Rainier Valley. A huge wall of affordable housing has recently been constructed near where I live, which used to be vacant lots with lots of sketchy activity. It has really increased the connection to shopping areas and makes the area feel safer by increasing the number of eyes on the street.

Good development can mean lots of different things to different people depending on what it is replacing.

Open space is a positive thing while vacant lots or parking lots aren't as good.

A lot of what makes a difference is the proximity to a major road.

#### **4. "What types of affordable housing are most needed in your neighborhood?"**

There is a need for affordable housing for people who work in the industrial area around Ballard. Also for elderly people, especially women living in single family houses who might not need that much space anymore. There is new senior housing on Leary Way. We also need entry level and community-oriented housing. Seattle Housing is bidding for the old library site. Ballard really needs housing for seniors and workforce housing. I live in a 400sf apartment and until recently, there were two of us living there. There is a need for smaller places, which also allows for more units to be built. That sort of density can also help reduce pollution and congestion on roads because people wouldn't be as dependent on cars. People take their money with them when they live in a different community from where they work.

Think urban, live local.

We, as a city, keep changing what affordable means. A lot of people are spending more than 30% of their income on housing, which is the standard definition of affordability.

Homesite builds affordable housing, Artspace builds places for artists. 120 artists live at the recently finished Tashiro Kaplan building and there is a long waiting list for it. Jackson Place houses a lot of immigrants. We really need affordable housing for people with lower incomes because when they have to commute, they have to pay more for extended childcare and car repair. We definitely need more affordable apartments and condominiums.

Single-room occupancy is also important. The homeless problem is ridiculous. Homeless people also have other social service issues that need to be met that extend beyond housing, or what many affordable housing providers can address. There are other issues beyond the amount of money for housing.

We really lose a lot of affordable housing with the destruction of older units. I provide affordable housing because I've kept the rent the same for years. Should the City provide incentives for owners who provide affordable housing, even the smaller property owners?

How much affordable housing does the city really have? You create affordable housing by preserving the existing units and not providing incentives for its destruction.

In the North Rainier Valley, we really need affordable housing entry-level people, families and seniors.

Ideally, you should be spending less than one third of your income on housing including utilities, insurance and maintenance.

It (subsidized housing) can also be a disincentive for people to better themselves through jobs and increased income because they don't want to lose their housing.

It's not just warehousing anymore, in a lot of circumstances tenants are happy to move on when they have a better income.

**5. "What factors do you believe most influence housing affordability? How are these factors addressed or influenced by Land Use Code requirements?"**

I think affordability is decreasing because new construction is very expensive. People also start to feel like they've outgrown their house and rather than moving out into the suburbs, they turn what used to be a starter home into a better one, which then just increases the property value.

People don't want to move out to Auburn, so remodeling is the best option.

Some people just don't want to move out of affordable places. There are waiting lists for affordable housing.

Where can families with modest incomes live? Not in my neighborhood anymore, it used to be an affordable area.

The code could help by allowing smaller places, smaller apartments maybe single room occupancy.

Eliminating parking requirements would help.

Parking and roads have to get really bad before people will start to change. It's no wonder you can't get people to stop relying on cars.

Parking is going to be a problem in any popular neighborhood. People just have to get over it.

There is a lot of ugliness created by parking, particularly at the street level. Many neighborhood plans have goals about ground-related housing but in most new construction, you have to walk through the garage to get to your yard.

Parking is a raging debate. Developers and owners aren't necessarily going to provide more affordable units if they don't have to provide as much parking. If the requirement for parking is

removed and just let the market decide, it is not going to work. Parking requirements should come with other zoning requirements. It all needs to be tied together.

The size of the units is a factor that affects affordability, as is the 'posh factor.' Ballard needs more working class housing and functional things (amenities), which cost less to build than fancier ones. There are a lot of things people think they want but that they don't really need. We're sold a way of how things should look and people buy it.

Density is definitely an issue. We need to encourage density with public benefits. There is a relationship of cost to relaxation of zoning requirements, but I'm not sure how to deal with that.

Zoning does seem to play a role in affordability. It seems to be what's happening. There are very elaborate financial packages required for a project. Affordability is not a priority for government, it keeps changing the definition of what is affordable.

What if government got out of providing affordable housing? We have Walmart and Costco – if the market can find a way to provide cheaper goods, can't the market also provide affordable housing?

I think zoning does make a difference in affordability, especially related to parking and density.

If you increase the number of units in a building, you can increase the affordability.

What's the difference? There are still the same costs for construction? Why would the developer charge less rather than make more money? Seattle has always had affordable housing so what broke the market that we don't have enough affordable housing anymore?

Housing Resources Group has been around for a while. The government has historically been involved in providing affordable housing because the market can't supply enough of it.

Prices and financing play a significant role in affordability. Tax abatements of about \$700 per year per unit where I live allowed me to own my place.

Again parking is a big issue within the zoning that impedes affordability. When one to one and a half parking stalls are required for each unit, it limits the number of units that can be constructed, which decreases affordability and limits the range of people who can afford to live there.

It's not just density though, look at Belltown They could have constructed much denser buildings than they did and the places definitely are not affordable.

**6. "In your opinion, what types of development are proven to be most affordable (and for whom?) and does the zoning accommodate this type of development?"**

I think it depends on the developer. A lot of affordable housing comes from developers with the specific goal of providing it and they typically receive subsidies and are non-profit businesses.

What about adaptive reuse?

The preservation of existing stock also really helps the character of an area.

CHHIP gets some older buildings and it is extremely expensive to renovate them. It's often cheaper to construct new buildings than bring older ones up to code. Part of it depends on how the building was originally constructed. Electrical and plumbing are particularly expensive, depending on the structure.

I can't believe we are supposed to be a wealthy country yet we're nickel and dimeing affordable housing.

Timing plays a role too. At the 8<sup>th</sup> and Madison site, the developers went to Council to have their MUP extended so that they could delay construction until it was financially feasible for them to build and rent. Even though the developer had plenty of money to construct it at the time. It's outrageous that the property was kept off the market, other developers weren't even allowed to purchase it until they decided the price was right. Nothing was given back to the neighborhood! I don't know if you can fix the problems through zoning. The City needs to enforce the rules that we have already.

What about underdeveloping? There is more return potential in more units. The cost of condominium insurance is a big factor. Should the City enforce maximum development potential?

It's an interesting idea, but people would have to look really hard at the current zoning to see if that would make sense.

At the former Chevron site in Ballard they really underbuilt what was allowed, and what would have been best for the neighborhood. I'm not sure about requiring developers to max out the zoning, we don't want to see that [general agreement]. Maybe require at least half of the allowable development density?

Half of the maximum density could be a good requirement. There are mixed use buildings in area that don't have a market for retail uses. It would be good to make it easier to allow those spaces to be live/work lofts. The separate processes need to be eliminated so that there can be more flexibility around ground floor uses.

Enforcing maximum zoning has to have a down side. If you own an existing building, would you have more non-conforming uses with single family remodels in LDT zones? Wouldn't we also see the wall/canyon effect if everything was maxed out in terms of zoning?

Should the code require some diversity in terms of affordable housing? Are there issues of fairness that could be addressed?

Paris is an example of a city with good diversity. DC on the other hand is not a good example of integrated areas.

Façade modulation for the skyline could also help improve the way buildings look so we don't see so many flat roofs.

**7. "What about the multifamily code requirements are hard to understand or may not produce the intended or desired results?"**

The code might not be the best place to address and maybe it would just increase the complexity if we tried to encourage diversity through it.

What is really the purpose of reducing complexity? Bosh. It's not ever going to be simple. Seattle is a complex city.

It's the cost of doing business. We sell ourselves short by focusing so much on trying to make new development easier. It's like were willing to take anything, a new McDonald's for example, which a lot of people really don't want to see in their neighborhood.

We'd rather have a more complex code so we don't see so many new buildings that just look like boxes.

Maybe a more subtle code, rather than just a more simple one is what we need.

If the code is just re-organized for the sake of simplicity and we just end up with fewer pages, I'm not sure that would really be such a good thing.

Do we have a balance between encouraging good development and discouraging bad? What really is it about the code that is so complex anyway? In Design Review, it's SEPA, environmental overlays and the code...details can't be talked about. Design Review needs to be taken more seriously. Maybe Design Review board members should receive some sort of compensation and have increased authority to negotiate issues like modulation and building materials.

Design Review is not allowed to consider pedestrian traffic and sidewalks, which also really need to be addressed.

**8. "The Comprehensive Plan and many neighborhood plans call for a mix of housing types. How do you think we can achieve a mix of housing types? Do you think the Land Use Code allows for this?"**

It depends on what type of housing you start with. Ballard was originally a working class area; now there are lots of townhouses and condominiums being constructed, that actually don't look too bad.

Maybe we need more mother-in-law type housing? Both attached and detached.

[The mix of housing types] is being driven by developers.

The 'mews' (?) style, which is good, goes back to the 1920's.

What does the notion of different types mean? Do we want people to live in yurts? What type of housing are we missing? The variety is in the mix of types of single family houses. Hawthorn Place is a large block with old brick townhomes with front yards and back yards that is hot, hot, hot. The types of multifamily homes that have privacy and density are not being built. Why? Is it a code problem? I don't think so because it gets done when there is vacant land or semi-vacant land.

We've got lots of single-family houses [in the North Rainier Valley] that are beyond repair.

The detached accessory dwelling on Capitol Hill never had a vacancy, which is really good for the community.



Could the mix of housing types that are being built a zoning issue? How easy is it to do cottage housing or really small apartments?

I think Belltown has some 300sf condos.

Maximizing affordability and increasing density makes me really nervous because we would basically be planning for sub-standard housing.

I used to live in a detached mother-in-law apartment, shortly after my daughter was born. It was only 350sf and it was fine. It was a great transition space for me. Maybe we don't all need large spaces.

Maybe a small amount of tiny units would be okay, but I don't think we should pin our hopes for affordability on them.

It's almost un-American to be talking about building smaller places for people to live.

Historically people have lived in smaller homes.

Not in Seattle.

Most people around the world would be really happy to have 400sf to themselves.

Well what's preventing people from having them now?

There is a disconnect between what developers think their market is and what people would actually live in. There are probably lots of other things too.

There are a lot of new books out about smaller houses.

There are awards for the smallest house now too.

## **9. "How can we encourage good design?"**

Citizens need to attend more Design Review meetings. We need increased notification about when it's taking place.

The pretty pictures [renderings] you see of a project at Design Review really don't provide a good illustration of what the project will actually look like. Maybe the City can start giving out awards for good design?

Some developers voluntarily go through Design Review when they want to deviate from the code requirements.

We need to find a way to incentivize Design Review.

City-sponsored awards could encourage better design with a carrot rather than a stick.

How does Design Review work? Does community input really make a difference?

It takes place at specific public meetings and public comment is encouraged.

Design Review helps and educates neighbors, which might also contribute positively toward better design. It emboldens areas to tell developers what they should build.

It also emboldens Design Review staff to tell developers that they can't just build a blank wall along the street. One big company wanted to build that sort of building, but Design Review wouldn't allow it so they ended up not constructing anything.

Developers who come to our classes [at UW's Urban Planning program] always have good intentions. The code doesn't deal with innovation well because Design Review guidelines can be restrictive. There is a flower shop at Pike and Boylston, which is a great adaptive reuse project, that really had a lot of trouble getting through Design Review. In the end, it works really well and has a great historic feel. Maybe this developer's story could be shared with others so that people can learn more about successful departures from Design Review.

Maybe we need a review of the Design Review process?

Mark Hinshaw's articles are good for increasing awareness about good design. Awards are a good idea too.

Does the City have any award programs for good design? Does the County?

The AIA does. Maybe we need an academy awards of good design.

One Design Review issue is that we don't want to see anymore Dryvit, but what level of proscription is really appropriate? Sometimes the details really do matter – cladding, windows, color. They make deals to get something back. Design Review is a bit of a game. Developers will initially present a butt-ugly building and then you've got to whittle your way down to a building that they should have started out with but because they wanted their 1% variance, they started with something really bad so it would seem like they were giving something back to the community. We start off so far off the mark that we don't really end up getting something back.

In Ballard, they actually start with good projects but others do just start with something bad so they can trade to just an okay building.